

Why Do?: A Podcast That Looks at the Why Behind People Saying “I Do”

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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April 2018

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2018

SPC011
Undergrad
Thesis
LD
2489
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Abstract

Marriage is an institution that is at the heart of our culture. But, marriage today isn't the same as it has always been. Changes in the social, political and economic mores of our society have created an environment where marriage is arguably unnecessary. Marriages of the past are depicted as a social and financial agreement between families. These agreements are not based on love, but on business, and they are necessary for the prosperity of all parties involved. In contrast, marriages of today, while they do provide some financial benefit, aren't usually based on fiscal agreements between families. Instead, they are based on emotion and attraction between two individual people. With the institution of marriage no longer being thought of as necessary for basic quality of life, and with the divorce rate being so high in the United States, questions arose as to why people even still get married. Through a series of conversations with individuals who possess knowledge and experience on the topic of marriage, this project aims to answer the question, "Why do people still get married?"

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Peter Davis, for his guidance and support. I'd also like to extend my sincerest gratitude to Sara Andler, Olivia Power and Jacob Gates for their understanding, kindness and caring. Finally, I would like to thank Mike, Cara, Hope, Ralph, Bing, Morgan and Lisa for being such willing, honest and educational participants.

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Process Analysis

I am a romantic. Even though I feel like I should know better. I had a best friend, Phillip, when I was a toddler. He and I were married several times by our older sisters before we discovered what cooties were. Needless to say, I began thinking about marriage at a very young age. I consider myself very fortunate to have grown up in a household with parents who remained married. In retrospect, they were a great example of what a marriage actually looks like. But, somehow, perhaps because I was too young to realize it, I ignored the example in front of me and instead looked to the media to tell me how I was supposed to love and be loved.

If thinking about marriage when you're a toddler is too young, then the age when the films you watch center around relationships is practically prenatal. One of my favorite movies growing up was *Sleeping Beauty*. While I don't think this was the intention of Disney, that film was essentially teaching me that all a guy had to do to be worthy of marrying was wake you up.

Later in life, as I began watching more "coming-of-age" films, the parameters of marriage didn't become any more defined. Movies like *A Cinderella Story* and *Angus, Thongs, and Perfect Snogging* show high school romances that conclude with the notion that everything was "happily ever after" for the rest of eternity. Stories like this led me to believe that the first person you ever fall in love with should be your last and that a high school romance is easily transformed into a life-long commitment.

Weirdly, one of the biggest offenders in the media's over-simplification of marriage is the Hallmark channel. Hallmark has become known for producing an exorbitant amount of Christmas movies throughout the holiday season. Many of my

family members have fallen prey to the Hallmark spell, so I have seen quite a few of these aforementioned films. Most every Hallmark film ends in a proposal. I am not sure I have ever seen one that didn't. Many of the films follow a similar formula that features a businesswoman, who is already in a relationship, returning to her hometown to eventually find that she is better suited to a quieter life and a more rugged man. Despite the female lead experiencing a traumatic event that brings her home, a complete personal transformation, a break up and barely the beginnings of a new relationship, by the end of the film, she finds herself ready to agree to marriage. Though the content claims to be more mature, the qualifications for a person to be "marriage material" don't stray all that far from the ones we see in *Sleeping Beauty*.

When I finally began to enter into romantic relationships myself, the ideologies I had learned from romance movies did not serve me too well. When problems arose in my relationship, I was not prepared to work through them or to recognize that not every relationship is meant to turn into a marriage. Learning these realities was probably the worst growing pain I experienced. To go from thinking that being in love with someone is enough to sustain a life-long bond without any extra effort to realizing that relationships are more about commitment and compatibility is not an easy change to make. I found it easy to become disillusioned with the entire institution of love and marriage. Studying contemporary literature that discussed love and marriage didn't make me feel any better.

The romantic in me didn't want to give up on the notion that marriage could be something wonderful. When it came time to decide what to do for this thesis, I couldn't help but see it as the perfect opportunity to do some investigating into marriage and why

people still do it. I wanted to talk to people whose relationships I respect and admire. Even though I knew anything they could say would be educational, I was secretly hoping that it would also make me hopeful about marriage once again.

I chose to format my thesis as a podcast for several reasons. I am an avid podcast listener myself. I find it to be an engaging and unique medium that has turned out to be a place where many voices that are often silenced can be heard. I personally listen to primarily comedic, interview-based and story telling podcasts. Productions like *2 Dope Queens*, *Serial* and *Soooo Many White Guys* have taught me that, with the right skills, simply hearing people speak can be as captivating and entertaining as a television show. I also feel that by eliminating the visual element of a production, podcasts are able to force listeners to really focus on what is being said and not all of the miscellaneous distractions that go into a television production. Above all, I find that podcasts are the best medium to capture the natural and charismatic flow of conversation.

I am not someone who likes to be involved in many social situations. I am aggressively introverted and despise small talk. I would not consider myself to be much of a conversationalist. However, a friend recently told me that it doesn't seem as though I don't like to talk to people at all. Instead, it seems like I just prefer to talk about things that are thought provoking and important instead of wasting time with small talk. This comment catalyzed a realization in me. Essentially, this friend was completely right. As much as I despise awkward chitchat, I thrive on stimulating conversations. Feeling like I can connect with someone enough that we feel comfortable sharing personal sentiments with each other invigorates me. This affinity for personal conversations combined with the intimate nature of podcasting made my choice of creative medium for my thesis clear.

To carry out this thesis, I began by listing couples that I felt had an interesting perspective on marriage. Initially, I wanted to interview people at all stages of marriage (engaged, newly married, married for a few years, married for 30+ years, people married for 50+ years, etc.). I also wanted to speak with couples with different cultural backgrounds that affected their experience of marriage. I soon found that my options for interviewees would be greatly limited by my own place in society. As a heterosexual, young, white woman living in America, I mostly know people just like me. This means people who either are not married yet or have experienced marriage in a very similar way to myself. After scouring the limited pool of people I know, and accessing connections through friends and family, I settled on four couples I wanted to interview.

The next step I took prior to beginning my interviews was compiling questions I wanted to ask each couple. The most challenging part of this step was creating questions that weren't leading, too invasive and that encouraged conversation. I tried to order the questions in a way that would begin by encouraging my guests to just get talking. In order to do this, I began by asking people to introduce themselves. From there, I encouraged them to tell the story of meeting their partner. This question helped the couples to get in the mindset of discussing their relationship. I also found that reflecting on the beginning of their relationship tended to bring couples together and put them in a good mood. For some couples, beginning with this question led to them answering all of the following questions together as opposed to from their own individual perspective. I also took some time to develop questions for each individual or couple. I had picked everyone for a specific reason and I wanted some questions to reflect what was unique about this couple.

It was most difficult to create a question that would get to the root of why the couples got married without making it seem like I was calling into question their relationship as a whole. However, I found asking this question was a lot easier when I was actually in the interview. The natural flow of conversation, as well as the fact I was lucky enough to have very willing participants, made this question more of an intuitive next step as opposed to an overly intimate prodding.

After compiling my questions, I went about scheduling interviews. I was lucky enough that everyone I was hoping to interview was able to meet with me. For each interview, I drove out to a space where the interviewees were comfortable. I felt it was important for me to come to a space that was theirs because I was the one asking them to share their lives with me. Many participants were somewhat nervous about the process. The added element of being recorded understandably makes people feel as though there is more pressure. After discussing with them what my project was all about, and why I valued their opinion in particular, most people began to warm up to the conversation. Being able to record everything on my computer also helped to create an organic environment. There is far more pressure when speaking into a microphone than there is casually chatting while a computer records.

After I completed my interviews, I planned to edit the episodes into nicely concise exchanges. I thought about how I could interject more of my own voice and move certain blurbs around so a topic was discussed in full all at once. But, every time I listened through the episodes, I became engrossed in the conversation and the experience all over again. I thought about all the small things I could change and constantly felt as though I was impeding on the natural flow of each conversation. In the end, I had to

remember why I chose to make a podcast in the first place. I wanted to capture the magic that happens when people engage in meaningful conversation. Because of this, I chose to leave the conversations unedited. My hope is that this choice allows listeners to get not only a fuller understanding of the conversation, but of the people I interviewed as well.

Introduction

During the fall semester of 2017, I was enrolled in an honors humanities course that looked at literature from the 1700s to today. As is true for most of literature, many of the stories we read centered around a romantic relationship and/or marriage. Because of this, I began to take note of the trends and changes in marriage and relationships that were being presented through the readings. In doing so, I discovered that the institution of marriage has undergone somewhat of a metamorphosis over those past few centuries.

When we studied two Russian short stories, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Tolstoy and *The Lady with the Dog* by Chekhov, I began to think about how the state of love and marriage is indicative of a society's priorities as a whole. I then began to look at the stories we read as a sort of timeline for the alteration of marriage. As I did this, I became more and more curious as to how marriage has remained such a prolific practice even as it has lost its necessary nature.

The Russian short stories we read painted a picture of marriage that was based on financial and social necessity. Both Dmitri Gurov and Ivan Ilyich were married men who hated their wives. In the case of Ivan Ilyich, his impending death brings the worst out of his wife. Instead of being by his side and helping him through his pain, Ivan's wife is occupied only with the money she will receive upon his passing. For Dmitri Gurov, his wife is so unimportant to him that she is barely mentioned. Instead, the story is centered on the extramarital affair he has with the lady with the dog. For both Gurov and Ilyich's wives, their marriage offered them financial security that they would not otherwise be able to ascertain as women in their society. The fact they may not love their husbands is far less important than this fiscal shelter. For Dmitri and Ivan, the necessity of marriage

lies in the money they would receive from their wives' fathers, in addition to having someone to run their household and give them children. In fact, Dmitri's many extramarital affairs throughout *The Lady with the Dog* would make one think that casual sex and relationships were meant for love and happiness, and marriage was an institution entirely unrelated to such concepts. These two short stories confirm the fact that, in those days, marriage was not about feelings; it was about finances.

The "business-like" quality of marriage illustrated in the Russian short stories was echoed in the rational thinking movement of the Enlightenment. For example, in *Emile, from Marriage* by Rousseau, the "essential" differences between men and women are argued. This argument, which was thought to be rational and trustworthy because of the "evidence" behind it, also lends itself to the necessity of marriage quite easily. If men and women were essentially different (and you're assuming heterosexuality), then uniting the two skill sets through marriage would be necessary for simple survival. If you have to eat to live, and you can't cook as a man, you need a wife to survive. And if you can't work as a woman, and you need money to survive, you have to marry to live.

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock by T.S. Eliot begins to show the way marriage changes when it is no longer a societal necessity. Eliot paints a picture of a man with so many options in the modern world that he becomes crippled by fear and indecision. Prufrock, unlike the men in stories before him, doesn't necessarily need to get married in order to establish financial and social security. In the absence of necessity, emotion rushes in. In Prufrock's case, it is his fear that rushes in and takes over his romantic life to keep him from ever professing his feelings of love to a woman.

Eliot's modernist perspective is the perfect set up for existentialism. It makes sense that individualism and existentialism come about once advancement of all kinds has allowed for a new wave of independence. Because it was no longer necessary to get married for survival and success, an individual could focus on doing entirely what they felt was right. Existentialism supported the notion that our deepest conscience always knows what is best for us. And even though Camus' *The Guest* doesn't involve a love story of its own, its clear argument for allegiance to internal morality leads me to believe that Existentialists would support marriage based on love and emotion instead of necessity.

In today's world, the majority of people do not need to marry in order to survive. The increase in independence, not only for women, but also for the individual as a whole, removes the aspect of necessity from marriage for a majority of American people. These readings illustrate that marriage's reliance on necessity has gradually been replaced with a reliance on emotion. Because of this, it's really no surprise that our own society thinks of marriage as a purely emotional institution. In fact, many people today question whether or not there is a purpose to marriage at all. But even still, large majorities of people do get married at some point in their life. It seems to me that in the absence of necessity, we have now begun to market marriage as a sort of fairytale in order to keep the institution going. Society begins by socializing young kids, especially girls, to aspire to marriage. They continue by preying on the human desire for love, attention and security. Then, they paint a fantasy that offers all of these things but without telling anyone about the effort, commitment and struggle that it takes to get there. Eventually, the absence of all these efforts becomes part of the fantasy. But without effort,

commitment and some struggle, a happy and fulfilling marriage is not possible. The inability to attain this fairytale results in a cycle of attempt and failure that complicates the life of the individual all while making a lot of people an exorbitant amount of money.

In the time since many of these stories were written, thousands of people have begun marriages based entirely on feelings. Unfortunately, in that same time, our society has seen a large spike in divorce rates. While it is certainly true that the rise in divorce rates has been impacted by other phenomena like longer life spans, the change in reasoning behind marriage is an undeniably large contributor as well. In fact, the rise in divorce rates itself serves as further evidence of the lack of necessity of marriage. If marriage were as necessary as it used to be, more couples would be forced to stay together for social and financial reasons.

While these stories could tell me how marriage had changed over time, they could not answer why marriage is still such a huge part of our society despite no longer being essential. Being a romantic myself, I had begun to feel quite disheartened by what I had learned. I felt like I wanted to get married, but there was no really good reason to do so other than it being what people do. Because of this, I decided to dedicate my thesis to finding out why people still get married.

Podcast

<https://soundcloud.com/sterling-andler>

Conclusion

Each interview I conducted gave me a new perspective on marriage and what reasons there are for engaging in the institution. The first couple I interviewed, Mike and Cara, taught me that marriage not being necessary isn't always a bad thing. Cara

discussed her belief that there is no such thing as “the one.” Contrary to what we see in the media, Cara believes that a relationship is based more on compatible values, effort and commitment than on how much two people love each other. Interestingly, this is part of what makes her marriage with Mike work. Instead of feeling like he is her soul-mate and that she is destined to be with him, Cara feels Mike is a person to which she is impeccably matched and chooses to be with. The emphasis on choice in their marriage is what helps them to be realistic about what it takes to keep a relationship going. Instead of expecting to love each other at every second, they choose to act and speak out of love to one another everyday.

For Mike, the realization that marriage is more about the little every day moments instead of the big life experiences was essential to his decision to get married. For a time, Mike struggled with the fact that getting married would mean he would no longer be able to live a life with only his needs in mind. He shared that prior to proposing, he reflected on a time in their relationship where they were living apart. He described spending the first month or so eating and doing whatever he desired and feeling like it was paradise. After that first month, however, Mike began to feel lonely and depressed. In retrospect, he considers this to be one of the saddest times of his life. But because of this experience, he was able to realize that being with Cara, and being in a relationship in general, wasn't about endless adventure and unforgettable experiences. Instead, it was about the fact that being with Cara made all of those little moments, like watching television and cooking dinner, much better.

In a way, marriage not being necessary made it all the more wonderful. Cara didn't feel like her only option in life was being with Mike. Instead, she felt like it was

an option that she loved and wanted to put effort into. Mike didn't feel like being with Cara was going to fill his life with an endless amount of exciting adventures. Instead, he felt like her presence made even the most boring thing a bit more bearable. Their mutual choice to be together and share each and every mundane moment together gives their marriage a sense of purpose that I feared had been lost.

Hope and Ralph showed me that taking your time when it comes to marriage is perfectly fine. They spoke often of what they call the "Hope and Ralph Plan," which referred to the ten years they spent together prior to getting married. While they make fun of themselves now, this time they spent together before getting married is also something they credit with strengthening their bond in the years since. Because they knew each other for so long before getting married, they knew they had compatible habits and lifestyles that would make for easier compromising throughout the relationship. For them, their long-term relationship prior to getting married assured them that they would work well together in a marriage. Because of this, it was a critical factor in deciding to get married.

Lisa, the subject of my third interview, was the only person I met with who was remarried. To me, the concept of remarriage is, perhaps, the greatest evidence that there is still a reason to get married. The fact that people get married, experience that marriage ending, and still feel inclined to get married again really is really impactful to me. Lisa discussed with me several compelling reasons behind her choice to marry again. Firstly, I was very interested to hear that the pressure to get married is not reserved for young people alone. Lisa described feeling far more pressure to get remarried while in her fifties than she felt to get married in the first place when she was young. Another point

she made was that even after being married for nearly thirty years, she was still hopeful that another relationship could be even better and more fulfilling than her first. In her case, she was correct. She attributes this success to her previous experiences teaching her more about what she does and does not like. Apparently, no one is immune to the exciting nature of romance.

The final couple I interviewed, Ashleigh and Morgan, were the only couple I met with who were not married. However, after being together for six years, their commitment to one another is much like that of a married couple. Their perspective was particularly intriguing to me because they were also the only couple I interviewed who were members of the LGBTQ+ community. Their expectations for marriage, as well as how they fit into the institution, were different because of this. Ashleigh mentioned a particular moment in daytime television where she first saw a lesbian couple get married. For her, this was the first time she realized that the concept of marriage applied to someone like her.

Interestingly, Ashleigh and Morgan both mentioned that when they thought of marriage, they thought of the wedding, not of the relationship that comes after. This was not a reflection of their own beliefs and desires, but instead of what they had seen in the media growing up and amongst their peers. Part of this perception is responsible for why they haven't gotten married yet themselves. To them, the relationship they already have is more of a marriage than throwing an expensive party is. But despite all of this, Morgan and Ashleigh haven't actually ruled out getting married. The desire to do so belongs more to Morgan, but Ashleigh feels inclined to do so as well because it would make her partner happy. For them, getting married would be a way to celebrate their

relationship and form a memory with their family and friends of a time when they publicly agreed to remain committed to one another.

So, why do people still get married? Well, it seems like there isn't always one reason. People get married because they think they're supposed to or because "that's what people do." They get married because life is hard and they feel it would be easier with a partner by their side. People get married because they want kids and tax breaks. And some people get married to celebrate a commitment they have already made to another person. Doing these interviews let me know that there are many good and important and wonderful reasons to still get married, and that the practice itself can really improve your quality of life. Just because it may no longer be absolutely necessary to get married, doesn't mean that there aren't plenty of worthy reasons to do so.

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